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ABSTRACT

Noting that young children's initial writing efforts are often dismissed as insignificant scribbling, a study explored children's emerging understandings about written language as indicated by the changes in 47 preschool children's autographs. Throughout a school year children were asked to write their names and draw pictures of themselves. Children's name writing samples, spontaneous verbal comments, and literacy-related activities were recorded throughout the year. The data were collected under both structured and spontaneous conditions. Results revealed that conventional or even recognizable autographs did not suddenly appear or result from the copying of models. Rather, autographs evolved over time as children devised strategies and followed intuitive rules while solving the problems of distinguishing writing from drawing, generating the culturally significant actions involved in writing, discovering the distinctive orthographic features of letters, and eventually controlling the conventions of name writing. The results support the conclusion that name writing is ideographic and not based on knowledge of letter names or on understanding letter/sound correspondences. (HOD)

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Name Writing and the Preschool Child

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the construction of written language knowledge as evidenced by the changes in forty-seven preschool children's autographs. Throughout the school year children were asked to "write your name and draw a picture of yourself." The resulting name wriing samples and concurrent literacy events indicated that changes in children's autogtaphs were not idiosyncratic but identifiable transitions in a cognitive constructive process as children gradually attempted to make sense out of written language by writing their names.

As children's autographs evolved over time they provided evidence that children construct knowledge about written language much as Piaget and others have suggested young children construct logico-mathematical knowledge; not by using adult logic but by trying to make sense of and understand written language.

Conventional or even recognizable autographs did not suddenaly appear or result from the copying of models. Rather, autographs evolved over time as children devised strategies and followed intuitive rules while solving the problems of distinguishing writing from drawing, generating the culturally significant actions involved in writing, discovering the distinctive orthographic features of letters, and eventually controlling the conventions of name writing.

The name writing samples indicated that initially, name writing is ideographic and is not based on knowledge of letter names or understanding of letter/sound correspondences. The conclusion was reached that name writing is an esssential ingredient in the emerging literacy of young children.

NAME WRITING AND THE PRESCHOOL CHILD

Young children's initial writing efforts are often misunderstood, ignored or dismissed as insignificant scribbling. As Goodman (1982, p. 1) notes: "The beginnings of the human infant's discovery of the writing system have been destroyed as children's scribbles and explorations of letter forms and writing functions have been thrown away."

This study explored the significance of children's scribbles and explorations of letter forms by asking 47 preschool children to "write your name and draw a picture of yourself". Throughout the school year their graphic responses to this request and other spontaneous remarks or behaviors related to literacy were documented. The resulting name writing samples and concurrent literacy events were considered evidence of children's emerging understandings about written language.

Young Children and Writing

If writing materials are available, even very young children will inevitably make marks. Yet, many parents and teachers continue to assume that writing is something that children must be taught. They believe that like other taught behaviors writing must be dependent on imitation of adult models, successive approximation to mature writing forms, and reinforcement. Such views of writing development overlook what is known about children's cognitive abilities and completely disregard what children actually do when they begin to make marks.

Children do not wait for a teacher or parent to teach them. Development does not depend on certain training experiences. "Somewhere between 3 and 5 years most children in a literate culture become aware that people make marks on paper purposefully" (Clay, 1977, p. 334). Children attend to these marks, they look at written language, they play at writing, they watch others write, they listen and look as others read writing to them, they watch others write down their dictation, and they ask questions about written language. They begin to construct knowledge about written language; they begin to write.

Despite the apparent ease of this task for children, "arranging to document systematically a child's natural literacy development has proven most difficult for adults" (Teale, 1982, p. 555). Historically, children's early writings have been examined figuratively and described as developmental sequences or examined symbolically and described as progressive refinement of symbolic thought. More recently researchers have viewed children's early writing as a constructive process and explored the underlying logic or psychogenesis of literacy development.

Each of these perspectives corroborated a finding by Harste (1984, p. 33) which served as a premis for this study: "whatever writtten responses chidren produced, they were the result of consistent systematic, cognitive decisions about how written language is organized." Although a review of these previous studies disclosed the lack of a cogent description of the actual strategies children employ as they construct knowledge about written language, they do provide a beginning and some guidelines for the study of children's emerging writing abilities.

Previous Understandings about Early Writing

Fifty years ago Hildreth (1936) described the "Developmental Sequences in Name Writing". She found that children's name writing samples progressed through several levels: aimless scribbling; systematic up and down scratching; horizontal movements with vertical strokes; separate symbols; correctly formed letters mixed with incorrectly formed letters; and finally, correct spelling of first name with occasional reversals or letter malformations.

Again in 1951, Ames and Ilg described "Developmental Trends in Writing Behavior". Like Hildreth (1936), they were concerned with correctness of letters, reversals, proper alignment, and other figurative aspects of writing. However, for the first time changes in children's writing abilities were studied over time and "cinema records of the pencil and paper behavior of subjects in developmental examination situations were examined in detail" (Ames and Ilg, 1951, p. 29). This thus marked the beginning of a transition from the study of what children write to the study of how children's actions become graphic actions and writing or symbolic thought expressed graphically.

Vygotsky (1978) and Wolfgang (1981) explained early writing as young children's refinement of symbolic functioning. For Vygotsky, "gestures, make-believe play, drawing, and writing can be viewed as different moments in an essentially unified process of development of written language" (1978, p. 116). As summarized by Atkins (1984, p. 4,) Vygotsky believed that children begin the process of learning how to write with

indicatory signs; proceed to symbolizing marks and scribbles; replace these with figures and pictures; and, finally reach the conventional symbols of written language.

According to the Swiss psychologist Piaget (1970), knowledge acquisition is not a matter of appropriation of ready-made pieces of knowledge, but a matter of reconstruction, in which the child actively builds up the object with its properties. Accepting this premis, recent research on young children's writing assumes that if children are to understand the writing system of their culture, they must be able to do more than form and name letters and utter sounds; they must actively construct the writing system for themselves (Atkins, 1984, Clay, 1982; Ferreiro, 1978). Ferreiro (in press) explains the constructive nature of written language knowledge by explaining: when learning to write, children "build up interpretive systems that are not mirror replications of what has been taught them." In this sense constructive connotes a process in which the end porduct (written language) does not just appear in conventional form but rather is the result of the child following a set of intuitive rules leading to an understanding of written language.

The intention of this study was to use these figurative, symbolic and constructive findings from previous studies of children's early writing attempts as a starting point for the construction of a definitive description of what children do and understand when they begin to make marks on paper. According to Jacob (1984, p. 83), in order to understand written language development "studies are neeeded that focus on a specific skill and document in detail the changes over time in individual

children's behavior." Name writing was selected as the focus to study because as Ferreiro notes: the child's own name as a model of writing, as the first stable written string, and as the prototype of all subsequent writing, often fulfills a very special function in the development of writing. It reflects the child's developing understanding of written language (Ferreiro and Teberosky 1982, p. 212).

Studying Name Writing

In the present study, the changes over time in children's name writing were documented and used as evidence to infer the processes, reasonings and behaviors children employ as they construct knowledge about written language while writing their names. Children's name writing samples, spontaneous verval comments, and literacy related activiites were recored in the classroom throughout the school year by the researcher who was also the preschool teacher. This use of a longitudinal, naturalistic research design is congruous with the theoretical stance that children construct knowledge about written language through interaction with their environment and others over time.

The Children. The forty-seven children participating in this study were enrolled over a period of four semesters (two school years) in the child development laboratory of a two-year community college in the southwest. They came from lower and middle class socio-economic circumstances and included Black, Caucasian, Mexican and Indian children.

At the beginning of the study the mean age for the children was four years; two months, with a range from three years to four

years; eleven months. In addition, all of the children lived in an urban setting surrounded by environmental print. Read (1971) found that writing began as early as three and a half years. Durkin (1970) reported that the most common time for interest in written language to appear was age four. Hall, Moretz, and Statom (1976, p. 584) concluded that "learning to write in the preschool years does occur for some children who have exposure to and models of writing in natural settings." Therefore, it was reasonable to expect these children would be in the process of constructing knowledge about written language.

The Preschool Program. Literacy was an integral part of the curriculum in the preschool these children attended. There was a writing center in the room. Props and materials which enable literacy related play were added to dramatic play situations. Children were read to everyday, in groups and individually. Books were available at all times for children to read or to ask adults to read to them. Print was everywhere in the environment.

Despite the obvious presence of many literacy events (any reading or writing experience in which children are involved [Goodman, 1982; Teale, 1985]) formal academic study and readiness activities were not a part of the preschool program. As in the program described by Cochran-Smith (1984, 42) "there was generally no conscious effort to teach reading and writing, and no overt acknowledgement that children were being taught a particular orientation to literacy. Reading and writing were intertwined with the nursery school activities and were simply routine parts of the everday interaction betweeen adults and children."

Children were immersed in a written language environment and as Goodman (in press) recognized, they used "written language to gain or produce information." For instance, both teachers and children wrote names to indicate the order in which children were to participate in activities; to indicate who was in a group; to identify owners of objects; and, to remember turns or assign responsibilities. Attendance was taken with the help of children looking for the names of those who were "here today;" and, children were often requested to "put your name on your paper so we will know whose it is" or "find your name on the list to see if it is your turn."

Collection of Data

Data for this study were the subjects' name writing samples and the documentations of literacy events that arose during class time, throughout the school year. The data were collected under both structured and spontaneous conditions.

Name Writing Samples Structured Situation. In the structured situation, name writing samples were collected 26 times over four consecutive semesters. While seated in groups of four, at a table containing pieces of 11 by 17 inch paper and multicolored markers, children were requested to "write your name and draw a picture of yourself." This task was part of a routinely scheduled small group activity time during which children were accustomed to performing teacher requested tasks. Recognizing that writing is an interactive process (Dyson, 1982), and endeavoring to maintain the naturalness of the classroom, it was assumed that children would talk to each other and to adults during the name writing task. Children often asked for

assistance, sought or provided information, and/or commented on each others work. Name writing samples were augmented by manually recording this accompanying oral language as well as noting any non-verbal behaviors related to literacy. Recording was done by the teacher/researcher either during or as soon after the name writing task as possible.

During the collection of name writing samples, the teacher provided oral responses to questions asked by children. However, no written demonstrations or actual assistance in writing was provided by the teacher. The teacher did however, encourage children to complete the task. If children responded, "I don't know how", to the request to write their name, the teacher answered "just pretend to write your name" or "do whatever you can", a technique used successfully by Clay (1982) to precipitate writing behavior.

The ease of this task for the children is evident in the number of refusals to participate. On only six occasions out of 454 collected incidents (as indicated by "R" in Table 1), did children decide to make no marks or write or draw something else. Harste (1981, 56) also found this type of behavior and referred to it as a strategy of negotiability. Hearing the request to write their name, children elected instead to perform alternate literacy tasks such as drawing or writing something else.

As set forth in Table 1, a total of 454 name writing samples were obtained from 47 children for an average of 9.7 samples per child. The largest number of samples (20, 22, and 18 respectively) were collected for Jeff, Emily, and Carlos who

happened to be enrolled four entire semesters of the study. The least number of samples collected per child was 5 for Alexi and Bradley due to absences on the days of collection. Name writing samples were reduced, photocopied and assembled into a chronological profile for each child.

Literacy Events Spontaneous Situations. Important evidence as to children's construction of knowledge about written language was also available outside of the structured name writing situation. In order to investigate the ways in which children spontaneously organized and used writing within the many literacy events in the classroom, written and verbal behaviors, especially as they related to name writing, were manually documented throughout the school year.

Analysis of Name Writing Samples

Written language development is a cognitive process and as such it is not observable. Eisner asks: "How does one make sense out of what is nonobservable? One way is to make inferences from observables to what is not observable (1981, 6)." The name writing samples in this study were the observables from which the development of written language was inferred. If children do indeed construct knowledge about written language, it was assumed that their autographs would evidence several changes over time and that the changes could be described.

Defining Transitions in Name Writing. Each change in a child's autograph was considered to be evidence of a transition in the child's thinking about written language. In order to analyze or make inferences from the name writing samples it was

necessary to derive standardized descriptions for all of the transitions evident in the name writing samples. The procedure used to devise a list of the transitions was inductive.

Using the steps described by Guba (1978, p. 53) for converting naturalistic observations into relatively objective categories, the name writing samples were first examined for recurring changes. Then, using the five levels described by Hildreth: disorderly or aimless scribbling; zigzag lines; zigzag lines combined with separate symbols; correct and incorrect written symbols; and correct and incorrect spellings and letter formations, attempts were made to classify the name writing samples. However, it was apparent these levels, based on the figurative aspects of writing, could not describe the changes evident in the name writing samples; nor did they reflect children's constructive understandings of written language. In order to describe all the changes, sixteen transitions in children's autographs were defined, numbered, and arranged in a sequence which most closely replicated the order changes occurred in the name writing samples.

Transitions Identified in Name Writing Samples.

1. Graphic actions (scribbling); no differentiation between writing and drawing; no recognizable figures or graphemes.

2. Graphic actions (scribbling); no differentiation between writing and drawing; random graphemes dispersed within drawing.

3. Spatial differentiation between drawing and name writing. Autograph is linear while drawing is global and circular.

4. Autograph is a continuous, horizontal, zigzag line.

5. Autograph is a continuous, horizontal zigzag line and separate grapheme(s).

6. Autograph is a string of linear, discrete, letterlike graphemes.

7. Reduction in number of graphemes. Autograph is a single pertinent grapheme, first few graphemes, or first and last letters of actual name.

8. Autograph is a string of 4 or more pertinent letters and/or place holders.

9. Autograph is a string of unordered pertinent letters, some missing or added.

10. Autograph is a string of ordered pertinent letters, some missing or added.

11. Autograph is written string in which pertinent letters plus place holders or graphemes equal number of letters in actual name.

12. Autograph is complete name written using recognizable but not yet conventional letters in conventional order and conventional number.

13. Autograph is complete (first) name written using conventional letters and conventional number of letters but not conventional order.

14. Autograph is complete (first) name written using conventional letters, conventioanl number of letters, and conventional order.

15. Autograph has been written conventionally but now contains reversed letter(s), order reversal, and/or other adaptive placement.

16. Autograph consists of both first and last name.

Clasification of Name Writing Samples. Two graduate students in early childhood education were trained to classify the name writing samples using the Flow Chart and instructions as shown in Figure 1. Both students, working independently, coded every sample. In 91% of the autographs both coders assigned the same transitons. For the remaining 9% (38 samples), the researcher determined the transition to be assigned..

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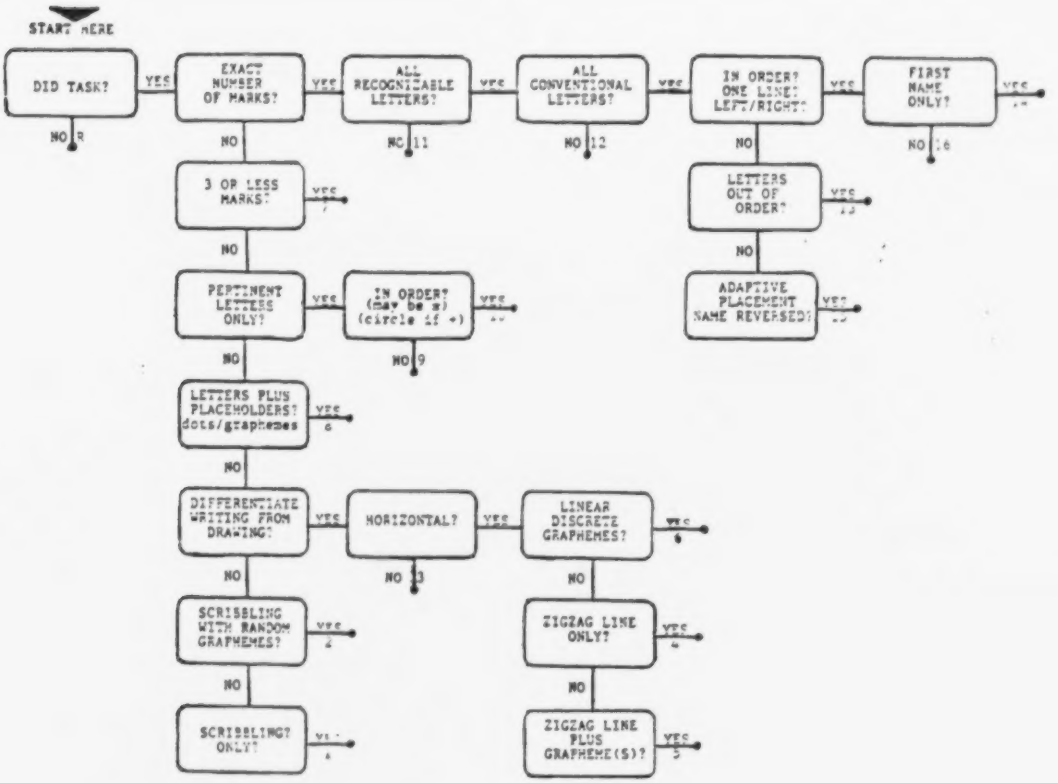
Fig. 1

Flow Chart and Instructions for Coding Transitions in Children's Autographs



To use the flow chart, note the distinguishing features and the number of symbol units in the autograph to be coded. Then, starting in the upper left hand corner, answer the question posed within each rectangle as it pertaines to the autograph being coded. A "yes" answer dicates movement from left to right and a "no" answer dictates movement from top to bottom. When a "yes" or "no" answer results in movement being terminated by a dot, the name writing sample is assigned the accompanying number thus indicating which of the sixteen transitions identified in this study the autograph represents.

Name Writing as a Constructive Process

In this study the changes in children's autographs were gradual transitions in which each difference was the result of children absorbing new information (assimilation) and blending it with previous information to arrive at a new more complex (accomodation) concept of name writing. Since "human beings are creatures whose immediate acts and behavior are products of their internal mental processes" (Wellman, 1982, p. 117), the name writing samples and the concurrent literacy events were considered to be the visible evidence of the intuitive rules children applied to the task of writing their names. Therefore, changes in children's autographs were transitions in children's thinking as they constructed knowledge about name writing and each "change" is more accurately referred to as a "transition".

Transitions Evolved Over Time. The transitions in each child's name writing samples by date of observation, years of attendance and age are set forth in Table 1. In 1983-84 there were 15 four-year-olds and 10 three-year-year-olds. In 1984-85 there were 13 four-year-olds and 14 three-year-olds, with five children (Aron, Brandon, Carlos, Emily and Jeff) participating in the study both years (note: Aron started school second semester 1983-84 and Brandon left school during first semester 1984-85). Of the 47 participants, twenty four were girls and twenty three were boys.

The direction of change and quantity of numbers on each line in Table 1 indicates that children did not just spontaneously write or copy their names conventionally. Every child produced autographs which evolved over time for an average of 4.6

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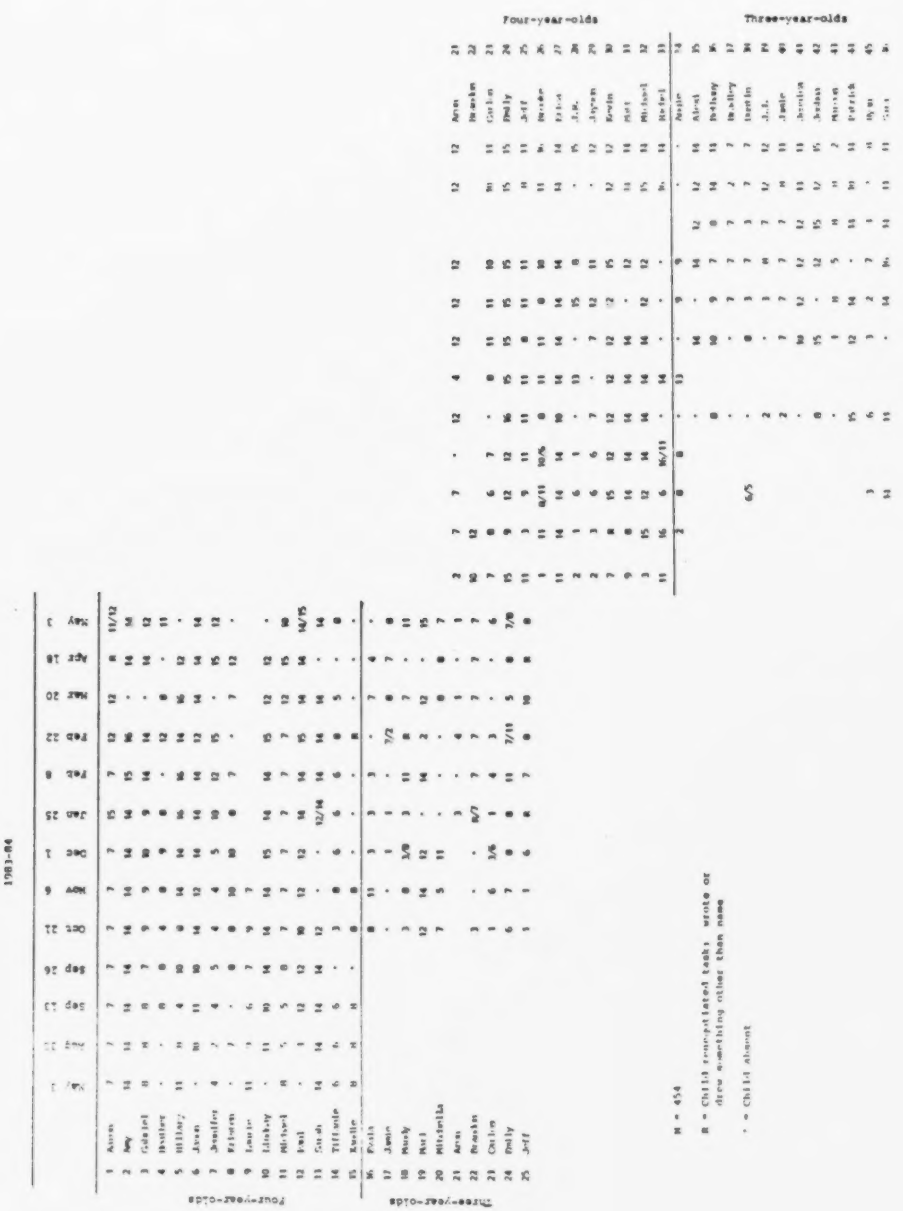
Table 1

Transitions in Individual Children's Name Writing
by Date of Observation, Years of Attendance, and Age



transitions per child during the course of the study. The word transition does not imply the direction of change. However, seventy-eight percent of the time (355 out of 454) children produced autographs coded with a number higher than their previous autograph. And every child ended the school year producing an autograph exhibiting a higher transition.

Transitions as Intuitive Rules. Change or evolution over time is only one critieria required of a process to be constructive. Constructive processes must also be generative; in other words, governed by a set of rules demonstrating successive improvement in the development of a product. This phenomenon was evident in the name writing samples. The following list of intuitive rules was inferred from the transitions demonstrated when children were asked to write their names:

1. Make marks on paper.
2. Make different marks for writing and drawing.
3. Make linear marks for writing.
4. Make linear, horizontal, zigzag marks from left to right.
5. Make linear, horizontal, zigzag marks from left to right and discrete graphemes.
6. Make linear, discrete, letterlike, graphemes.
7. Make pertinent graphemes.
8. Use placeholders if letters can't be produced.
9. Make any number of pertinent letters, in any order.
10. Make any number of pertinent letters, in order.

11. Make the same number of symbols as there are in actual name.
12. Make recognizable letters, in order, and appropriate number
13. Make appropriate number of conventional letters, in any order.
14. Make appropriate number of conventional letters, in order.
15. Be flexible.
16. Write first and last name.

In each transition children incorporated still applicable rules or replaced no longer appropriate rules with more advanced information. For instance, an autograph demonstrating Transition 5 (a continuous, horizontal, zigzag line with separate graphemes) incorporates all of the previously used intuitive rules: making marks; making different marks for writing and drawing; making linear marks for writing; making horizontal marks from left to right; and, making horizontal marks from left to right and separate grapheme(s). On the other hand, an autograph demonstrating Transition 12 (recognizable letters) no longer incorporates zigzag lines (rule 4), zigzag lines plus graphemes (rule 5), place holders (rule 8), any number of letters in any order (Rule 9), or too many or too few letters in order (Rule 10). These rules are replaced with Rules 11 and 12 which require the appropriate number of recognizable or conventional letters in order. Children's autographs demonstrated successive improvement overtime and each improvement was the result of added or rearranged information from previous autogaphs.

The name writing samples in this study evolved over time and contained a set of intuitive rules which demonstrated successive improvement in the development of name writing. Therefore, they can be considered evidence that children construct knowledge about written language while writing their names.

Name Writing as an Ideogrpahic Representation

For the children in this study, their autographs were ideographic or as Dyson (1983, 27) said "representational." Their autographs were graphic symbols representing individuals; objects used to express identity. Names were a way of indicating "this is mine", "I did this", "this is my place in line", "I am here", "this is me", etc. This meaning was represented by evolving graphic patterns and eventually by specific sets of letters, all of which children considered their autographs. The letters and graphemes of their autographs formed patterns which children could visualize and could produce. The letters did not represent oral language written down; children were not yet aware that the letters in their names could represent sounds.

Children did not say their names out loud and then encode the sounds they heard into letters. They gave no indication of any awareness that letters represented sounds. Surprisingly, some children gave no indication they knew the names of the letters. In fact, when asked directly, it became obvious that the youngest children, or those just starting to write their names, did not know the names of the letters they produced in their autographs.

As demonstrated in the following spontaneous literacy events which were reenacted many times in the classroom, children produced or recognized pertinent letters as parts of their names but were unable to attach the appropriate letter names to specific letters.

Teacher: (after writing Angie's name on a piece of paper, points to each letter and asks) "what did I make?"

A n g i e

↑ ↑ ↑

Angie: "o" "n" "o"

Teacher: "What did you write?"

Dustin: "D, N, E".

Teacher: (After writing J, e, s, s, i, c on a piece of paper), "Did I make an "i"?

Jessica: "yes", (points to letter "c").

Teacher: "Now what should I make?"

Jessica: "a circle with a line".

The children in this study demonstrated that they produced their names as a graphic whole; they first learned the graphic shapes or patterns which formed the letters of their names; gradually learned that those shapes, like other objects in the world, have conventional names; and only later will come to know those letters have constant, predetermined names associated with the sounds of oral language. The naming of letters seemed to

follow the ability to produce letters. Later the letter names apparently served as mnemonics, as aides to remembering the already known shapes of letters. Children were often observed looking upward, or concentrating as if to conjure up a mental vision of the letter and then saying the name of the letter as they wrote it; the mental image apparently preceding the naming.

These findings directly contradict the commonly assumed adult notion that writing begins with "the children's natural interest in the sounds of letters (Cohn, 1981, 553)." Obviously children in this study did not wait until they knew letter names or understood letter/sound correspondences before they wrote their names. Name writing preceded letter naming and provided the incentive to name letters. For these children letter names were used to remember the perceptually known shapes needed to produce their autographs. Their autographs were ideographs which were the symbolic representations of themselves.

The children in this study demonstrated the belief that any graphic representation they produced, any one of the transitions described in this study, was sufficient to represent their name. Children often exclaimed, "I wrote my whole name"; after producing the first letter, the first and last letters plus some placeholders, unordered pertinent letters, or eventually the appropriate number of recognizable letters. Ferreiro's (1982) often mentioned phenomenon of children needing three written letters for a word to be readable was not supported in this study. Children Writing at Transition Seven or lower (reduced number of graphemes or wavy lines) referred to their autographs

as "my whole name" even when the autograph consisted of one graphic symbol. To young children, the requirements (perhaps even the processes themselves) of reading and writing may be different. The number of letters required to write a name may be different than the number of letters required to read a name.

Adults who begin writing instruction with the introduction of letter/sound correspondences or are critical of autographs which contain other than conventional letters, may be going against children's natural tendency to first produce and understand their names as ideographic representations of themselves; as symbolic totalities not related to oral language or the conventions of written language. Because this ideographic conception of written language evolves over time, parents, teachers, and caregivers should provide ample time for children to experiment with written language.

Name Writing Moments and Transitions

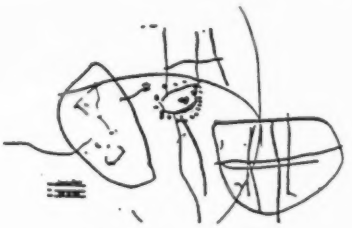
Vygotsky (1978, 116) envisioned the "essentially unified process of development of written language" as being subdivided into "moments." The process of development of name writing can also be subdivided into moments. The transitions in children's thoughts, evidenced by the changes in their autographs, appeared to cluster together in related groups. Each group seemed to form a literacy moment, a brief interval of time, a particular period of importance in the development of name writing.

Each moment in name writing was defined by the literacy concepts on which the child was centering. Passage from one literacy moment to the next involved the construction of written language knowledge and constituted development in the child's

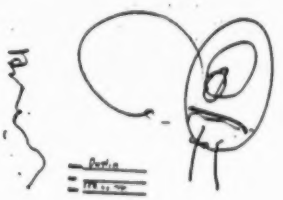
knowledge of name writing. In each of the four moments the children incorporated, or rejected, and then refined and expanded the knowledge gained during the previous moment. Control of each moment heralded the resolution of one literacy steppingstone and provided the foundation for the next challenge.

Moment One: Orthographic Separation of Representational Systems. This study and others have confirmed that "all children, by the age of three, differentiate between writing and drawing (Harste, 1984, 33)." The problem for the child, as Ferreiro (in press) explains, is "to understand what is the specificity of each representational system, i.e. what they enable one to represent, what they cannot represent and how they represent what they are supposed to represent." The following name writing samples, representative of transitions one, two and three, are reflections of children's solutions as to the orthographic differnces between writing and drawing.

Transition One
Paul



Transition Two
Jennifer



Transition Three
Dustin

For some children, when asked "to draw a picture of yourself and write your name" one graphic representation sufficed for both requests (Transition One). Gradually, as writing became seperate from drawing, graphemes "appeared unpremeditatedly in artwork (Lamme and Childers, 1983, 38)" and were dispersed within the

circular, global marks of drawing (Transition Two). Eventually, linear, up and down marks of writing accompanied the drawing but were segregated spatially from the drawing (Transition Three).

Transitions One, Two, and Three, connote what Wolfgang (1981, 119) has called the child's growing "awareness that there are [two] representational systems." One is writing, one is drawing and different marks are made to convey each system. Furthermore, children's autographs reflected symbolic understanding that marks in drawing (the pictures of themselves) retain a resemblance to the object depicted while marks in writing (their autographs) represent objects or persons by written symbols (Isenberg and Jacob, 1983). Autographs containing these transitions are evidence that children make "decisions about how the written language and artistic systems are organized (Harste, 1984, 33)."

Evidence that children are working on the separation of writing and drawing was also found in spontaneous literacy events recorded outside of the structured name writing situations. In the following example, Jessica, by her production of graphics, her physical actions of pointing, and her verbal responses indicated that to her writing can include both pictorial and non-pictorial markings.

Jessica	(in respoonse to teacher's question about what she just written) "I'm happy."
Teacher	"Where did you write 'I'm happy?"
Jessica	"Right here," pointing to the smiley face and moving her finger from left to right across the drawing, the graphemes, and the wavy line.

Bradley's name writing samples indicate that writing and drawing may remain intertwined for some time. Though able to produce a separate letter B for his autogaph, the B shape remains an integral part of his self portrait.

Young children, still comfortable with the close relationship between writing and drawing, sometimes combine the two for delightful results like Evan's picture of himself.

Moment Two: Generation of Culturally Significant Orthographic Actions. Once children produced autographs indicating they conceived of writing as different from drawing, the next task was to figure out what action they needed to take to produce culturally significant written language. In this study seven children (see Table 1) produced autographs in the form of a continuous, horizontal, zigzag line, (Transition Four). Their autographs indicated an understanding of writing in their culture as a horizontal, linear action consisting of up and down movements usually from left to right.

The following episodes are typical of many spontaneous literacy events in the classroom which illustrated this concept:

Teacher (Seated at table with paper and pencil) "Jamie, how should I write your name?"

Jamie "You go like this" as he gestures and draws horizontal zigzag lines in the air.

J.J. (to Dustin who is sitting at the writing table making marks on an envelope) "Hey Dustin, ya wanna play Heman?"

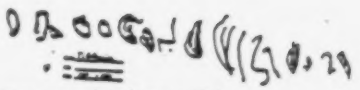
Dustin "Nope,I'm playin writing. (As he makes horizontal zigzag lines on numerous pieces of paper.)

Obviously, to these children, writing is an action. It is something one does physically as well as mentally. Literacy events like these indicate that to young children both the conception and the production of writing is an action performed in an attempt to produce culturally appropriate marks. Their autographs indicated that writing was interpreted globally, with no attention as yet paid to the existence, form, or configuration of separate symbol units.

As in the process of distinguishing writing from drawing, gradual rather than abrupt transitioning was evident in the progression from the concept of name writing as a culturally appropriate action to name writing as a string of separate symbols. The following autographs are examples of how names evolved from zigzag lines (Transition Four), to zigzag lines plus separate symbols (Transition Five), and finally to strings of culturally appropriate discrete, letterlike graphemes (Transition Six).

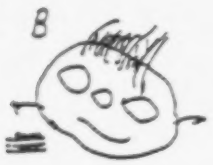
Transition Four
Hillary

Transition Five
Mitchella



Transition Six
Tiffanie

Moment Three: Concentration on Distinctive Orthographic Features of Letters. With the concepts of horizontal and separate graphemes established, children began to attend to the distinctive orthographic features of letters (shape, order, and number) within the conventional spelling of their own name. The realization that each grapheme must be a conventional shape caused children to temporarily forego the notion of their names as left to right strings of multiple graphemes, and forced them to concentrate on producing autographs of one or two conventional shapes (Transition Seven). These conventionally shaped letters were usually the first and last letters in a child's name.



Transition Seven
Brandon

Transition Eight
Heather

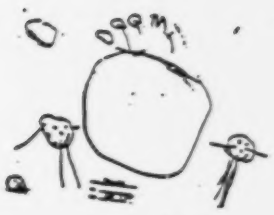
As concern for the production of pertinent and conventional letter shapes continued, children increased the number of pertinent letters produced and acknowledged the necessity of including other letters by producing autographs containing placeholders in the form of letter-like graphemes or dots (Transition Eight).

Some children produced autographs with too few or too many of the necessary pertinent letters evidencing no awareness of the necessity for order (Transition Nine). Gradually children were able to reconcile the need for both pertinent letters and order by producing autographs with ordered, pertinent letters but with some missing or extra (Transition Ten).

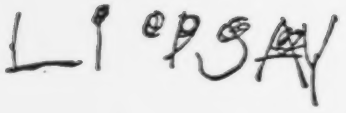
Transition Nine
Gabriel

Transition Ten
Patrick

The other orthographic feature of name writing to be reckoned with by children during this moment was numerosity of the string. Lacking the ability to produce sufficient conventional letter forms, children produced what letters they could and filled in the remaining required spaces with place holders. Thus children, using combinations of letters and placeholders, produced autographs with the exact number of graphic units essential to the conventional spelling of their names (Transition Eleven). In the following examples, Mandy wrote the first and last letters of her name plus three placeholders to equal the number of symbols in her name while Lindsay wrote the "L" and the "i" of her name, then made four place holders and wrote the "Y", only then did she return to write the "D", "S", and "A" on top of the placeholders.

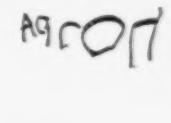


Transition Eleven
Mandy



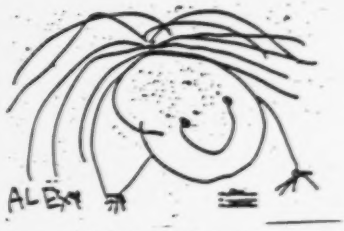
Transition Eleven
Lindsay

Moment Four: Control of Orthographic Conventions of Name Writing. Once the orthographic principles of shape, order, and number were realized, it remained for children to coordinate all of these features in order to control the conventionality of their names. They produced autographs with close facsimiles of all the letters in their names; autographs consisted of recognizable but not yet conventional letters, in conventional order, and conventional number (Transition Twelve). Occasionaly the order of letters was not produced conventionally (Transition Thirteen) but for the most part, by now, children produced conventional autographs (Transition Fourteen).



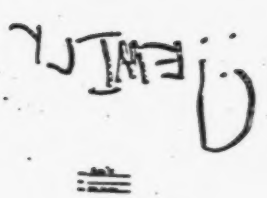
Transition Twelve
Aaron

Transition Thirteen
Carlos



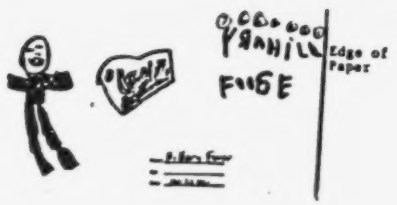
Transition Fourteen
Alexi

Even after conventionality had been established, some children produced autographs containing reversals of order within a string, and/or reversals of the entire string, when the edge of the paper, placement of the marker, or the drawing necessitated adaptive placement (Transition Fifteen).



Transition Fifteen
Emily

Transition Fifteen
Lindsay



Transition Fifteen
Hillary

Conclusion

The literacy moments and transitions defined in this study are constructive strategies children used as they began to understand written language by writing their names. Identification of these strategies is significant for as Kamii (1985, p. 8) has cautioned, "We must first be clear about how children construct knowledge because without an explanatory theory about how children construct knowledge, it is impossible to conceptualize specific objectives in relation to long-rang goals." The challenge to teachers should not be "back to basics," but rather forward to increasing our knowledge of how children acquire written language based on an understanding of how children construct knowledge. It is the responsibility of every caring adult to understand what children are doing as they construct knowledge about writing and to devise environments which build on what children know. Only then can children discover, construct and eventually understand written language.

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